

GENERAL RECALL SEPT 1976

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THE USS OKLAHOMA

EM1c 12/7/41

As told to G.E. Foreman's Historian of the USS OKLAHOMA ASSOCIATION DURING THE REUNION at Anaheim, July 5th to 8th, 1973. Irvin, the only EM with the group was liberated from D-63 on December the 8th at 1600 -----

Down in the Power Shop of the USS OKLAHOMA I was ironing a suit of Dungarees in order to be ready for the Admiral's inspection which we were to have the next day. "E" Div was scheduled to stand inspection in dungarees according to the Dope Sheet, so I wanted to be ready. I had just about finished with the pressing - I had taken enough time doing it - remember that Admiral was probably going to give us a real going over - then sud- denly GENERAL QUARTERS sounded!

It was shortly before 0800, and as I had always done in drill, picked up my tool-bag, including my flashlight, and headed for my GQ station which was in the Steering Room. I presume I turned off the iron, but I do not really remember. I started off at a dog trot - that's the way I was programmed for going to my GQ station.

The Power Shop was in the bow of the ship on the 3rd deck and so I had the full length of the ship to go. I don't exactly remember where enroute, but the ship lurched - I didn't understand what caused it - just as tho the big guns were being fired. This may have happened more than once, but I just don't remember. When I got to my station which was thru the Carpenter Shop down the ladder thru the red hatch - somebody closed the and dogged it down, as this was normal pattern for the setting of water-tight integrity. It is possible that someone else entered after I did, but I don't think so.

In the meantime, we were already aware that something was wrong - the ship was commencing to list and a grim and sobering feeling began to succeed to that of annoyance and surprise. (there were eight of us back there - seven Quartermasters and myself - and I was the highest rated man being an EM1c. The only other Petty Officer was Herbert Kennedy, a QM3c.

We had prepared for our normal GQ set-up and I had certain electrical actions to perform; but almost immediately it seemed, all sorts of unscheduled things began to happen. Lockers began to fall over - the ship listing more now - and then the lights went out. I can't recall if Battle Lanterns were ever turned on, or if we had any that even worked. I do know that shortly afterwards there was total darkness even before the ship completed turning over.

We were in total darkness and the only light we had was the flashlight I had brought with me as part of my kit. After what seemed like just a few minutes, the ship stopped her turning - not completely all the way over, but more like 120 or so. Water was coming in to the compartment and we were aware of the fact that we were in a very serious situation. People were beginning to fight the in-coming water by plugging up vent ducts;

but it was a kind of a hopeless operation because as we would plug up one and dozen spouts would squirt out some where down the line. We plugged up as many of the leaking fittings as we could with clothes and blankets and things to stop the discharge of water into the compartment. We realized that the mushroom caps on the top-side ventilators had not been secured because there hadn't been time for it. Normally, during GQ somebody had the duty of securing these mushrooms. They HAD to be secured from the outside, and in this case it never happened.

To back-track a little bit - during the time that the ship was turning over - the lockers were dumping over and the heavy spare parts boxes which were fixed securely in place during normal operations - even for rough seas; but when the ship rolled over these boxes of spare parts dumped out of their cradles; thus one of our big problems was how to keep out of the path of projectiles weighing hundreds of pounds. To this day I do not understand why no one got hurt from this heavy flying equipment.

Slowly we could see the water start to rise and after the ship had ceased her roll we considered the possibility of going into the Tiller Room and dogging ourselves in. The Tiller-room MIGHT be a more water-tight area. We did acknowledge the fact that should we dog ourselves in there, we might just be dogging ourselves in for KEEPS! So, after some discussion among ourselves, we decided to stay in the steering room.

Sometime earlier, when the ship had first come to rest, there were two wrenches we had salvaged from the equipment that was down there; one was an open end wrench - a big open end wrench a couple of feet long and the other was some kind of adjustable wrench - a large one - probably part of the equipment that was kept with the steering gear for emergency repairs. We used the big open end wrench as a pounding tool to send our di-di-di, di-di-di-di, di-di-di or S-O-S to those on the outside - that was the only part of the Morse Code I could remember, but I did remember that! The other wrench, the adjustable - we lashed into place at the man hole cover now being above us, which had been, of course, near the deck.

This man-hole led to a void space, and the idea was, that if worse came to worst, we would open it up and hopefully escape to another area; also knowing full well there may not be any retreat from there as it could turn out to be a dead end. It was also pointed out that it might not be any more water-tight than the place we were already in.

Thus we stayed in the Steering Room and as the water rose higher we started to climb up on some of the equipment or hanging on to anything which afforded a hand hold. The Motor-Generator set was up-side down and some of us were hanging on to it, or hanging on to the cage which housed the control mechanism for the electric steering equipment.

We heard a lot of noise coming from the outside; we heard people pounding and running and there were sounds that sounded like chipping hammers or cutting devices of various sorts. We realized of course, that sounds travel in metal and it was hard to determine what directions they were coming from.

I believe we were able to communicate with the people in Emergency Radio just forward of us. It seems we could hear them or we could understand each other to a degree, I'm not too sure. Anyway, we knew there was a bunch of people just forward of us. At one time, we heard all this commotion and felt sure they were coming for us and then we realized it was the people just forward of us who were released. They were making all those joyous sounds - jumping up and down - at least it sounded like it - as they were leaving. Later on I found out it was 0800 in the morning, December 5th, when these people were taken out. To this day I can't see why it took eight more hours to get us out! During the time we were down there nobody thought too much about time - I doubt if anybody even had a watch on anymore; we had previously unloaded everything and stripped down to our skivies. I personally was not aware of time; it seemed we were just in a sort of semi-daze as time moved on and for all any of us knew, it was still the same day. Later we found that we were under for 32 hours.

After what seemed an eternity, our hopes had been falsely stirred up a number of times, (particularly when the others were released) somebody outside had at last got to the man-hole. As best I can remember, we took off the air-cap from the inside enabling us to communicate by voice with the people above. Somebody called in and said they were going to allow the air pressure to equalize - and as the cap was taken off (here again I'm not too sure if we took the cap off or not) I THINK we unscrewed it from the inside. It was a test cap located in the center of the man-hole cover.

The air DID gush out as we had been under considerable pressure. We had not been AWARE of any great pressure because it had increased so slowly - and of course it was this same air pressure that was probably saving our lives as it kept the water from filling up too fast. We had considerable discussion as to whether the water level would completely cover the ship or whether this compartment would project high enough out of the water so that it would never completely fill up. At the same time we did not reach a conclusion as we couldn't know how far the ship had settled in to the harbor mud and we admitted all our calculations were mere guesswork. I think we wishfully came to the conclusion that Steering Aft would never fill up completely. When the air pressure was eventually released however, we became aware of a very rapid rising of the water level.

We opened the man-hole from the inside (that's what the wrench had been saved for in the first place) so we actually let ourselves out. As that water so rapidly rose, believe me but there were a few moments of panic as one by one we went thru the man-hole. I can't recall what order we went out in - I wasn't the first and I wasn't the last; I think I was somewhere in the middle. Everybody was EXTRA courteous in trying to encourage the other guy to go on ahead. I am sure that all hands at one time or other felt a certain amount of the same panic. I felt, "Can we make it?" or "got to get out of here real fast" still, everyone was going to let other guy go first.

We crawled thru a number of greasy places; the ship being capsized, of course, or perhaps thru tanks as we crawled for freedom. There were jagged edges as we squeezed thru freshly cut openings and when we were finally lifted out into the light of day we were quickly taken to the hospital ship Solace for examination and treatment.

Down in the sickbay of the Solace I received what I consider to be the only shot of legal booze in the Navy, something like a jigger of whiskey or brandy or whatever. We were assigned bunks and slept there on board; but next day, of all things, we were simply set adrift out in the Yard. The next night, my first night ashore, we slept in Bloch Center the yard recreation center. I never knew there could be so many mosquitoes on the island! We spent a miserable night.

Later I remembered my old buddy on the Pelius - Leroy Provin would fix me up with a place to sleep and a square meal and maybe a few clothes. As it stood, I had a towel, a skivie shirt and a pair of white pants; but my good buddy, Leroy Provin did even more; he went the extra mile and had transferred to the Pelius and from there on I was a Submarine Tender man.